



LeoBaeckTemple

Senior Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“Like a Work of Art”

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781 September 18, 2020

I was born in 1965. Old enough to be alive for the activism of the late 1960s, too young to have participated or even remembered it. I came of age in the 1970s – after the race riots... after the anti-war movement... after Watergate. And like many kids my age, I saw the era of my coming of age as hopelessly boring and inconsequential. I had just missed the marching in the streets, the living and dying for it, the events for the history books. Instead, I got disco. I wanted to live the events for the history books. Or so I thought.

I was already in my mid-thirties when I got my first real chance at living the events for the history books, as a New York rabbi on 9/11. Quickly, I learned what many of you – those older than me – already knew: living the events for the history books isn't all it's cracked up to be. 9/11 changed so much about our lives, so many of our habits and ways of being. And, incredibly, three times as many Americans will die of COVID-19 just between now and Yom Kippur than died on 9/11. And that's how it has already been for six months – and how it will be for God knows how much longer.

Living the events for the history books definitely isn't all it's cracked up to be. The oldest among us, those with memories of World War II, discovered this when they were very young – but even they have no analogue for this global pandemic, the kind of worldwide plague that shows up only every century or more, uniting the world in common cause. Of course, our world doesn't feel very united as we greet this new Jewish year. We are united only by how isolated this virus has made us. Even the way we are gathered right now – experiencing this holy day both together and entirely separated – is the story of the year 5781... our story.

What does it mean to be a part of a congregation that cannot congregate? This is the question that these *Yamim Noraim* – these Days of Awe – places before us. After all, there is nothing more profoundly counter-human than this separation, which totally arrested our sensibilities back in March but is becoming numbingly normal now. The Torah tells us so, from its very beginning. One by one, the wonders of the world are created, and God declares each one *tov* – “good,” even “very good” when looking upon the whole of it. *Lo tov* – “not good” – comes into being only when God looks upon human separateness, seeing Adam, the first human, all alone. “*Lo tov hey'ot adam l'vado*,” says God – “it is not good for the human to be alone.”

According to the very earliest rabbis of the Midrash, God is moved to this conclusion when Adam protests his aloneness, noting that all the other living creatures were formed in pairs. They had companions – and could increase companionship for all. Adam looked to the

skies and saw birds everywhere. In the seas, fish abounded. Why, he demanded, should he uniquely be left alone? The first human's first act was to rebel against being alone. And this was when God corrected the error in creation, moving beyond a single human to humanity, a biblical voicing of our biology as a social species. Or as French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, elegantly put it, "the approach to the face (of another) is the most basic mode of responsibility... the ethical rapport with the face (of another) is asymmetrical in that it subordinates my existence to the other." This is what it is to be human – to welcome the subordination of my own existence by looking into the eye of someone else, and seeing that I am obligated.

Something of the power of that obligation gets lost when looking into each other's eyes exclusively over Zoom. Our quarantine is keeping us alive, yes – and our rigorous commitment to it is beyond debate. We must distance. And we must mask. But something in us – something of us – is also at risk of dying, while we keep our bodies safe from harm. You see, even before this pandemic, another epidemic had already stricken our society... the epidemic of loneliness. And as we discussed just this past Saturday night at our Selichot program, clinicians understand loneliness not as a simple matter of actually being alone – it's the experience of feeling alone, even if you're not... feeling unneeded, unseen, unmissed. It is corrosive and dangerous. And it was already perilously on the rise even before we were relegated to separateness by the coronavirus.

Back in the late 1970s, polls suggested that roughly 20% of us were chronically lonely. By 2010, AARP polled us and discovered the number had doubled to over 40%. What changed? The biggest factor, scientists say, is the rise of internet technology – the very mechanisms that are granting us what little access to each other's faces we presently have. If you think that social media makes a person less lonely, the research strongly disagrees with you. The internet has slowly conditioned us to accept a large quantity of surface interactions as a substitute for the few high-quality interactions that create depth and meaning in our lives – which is why the number of people with no close friends has tripled since 1985. And yes, this means that loneliness is not uniquely for older people; in fact, some studies suggest that young people are three times as likely to feel alone as older people, even though they are constantly connected to others online – perhaps *because* they are connected so relentlessly to others online.

Now, don't get me wrong – I am grateful beyond words for the technological wonders that are enabling us to gather like this tonight... that have enabled us to conduct shiva services over Zoom, convening people on multiple continents in one virtual place to remember and to grieve and to comfort. I shudder even to think of what this pandemic experience would be like for all of us if not for the gift of the internet. But for a long time now, we've been talking ourselves into the notion that a text is the same as a talk, when in fact it just isn't. And the consequences of the loneliness we are cultivating in ourselves as a society – choosing and adapting to as a species – they are devastating. Increased heart disease. Increased risk of stroke. Increased substance abuse. Decreased memory and acceleration of Alzheimer's Disease – this, so many of you have told me you have witnessed in your own loved ones. Increased domestic violence. Increased gun purchases. Increased depression. Increased suicide.

Lo tov hey'ot adam l'vado – it is decidedly not good for us to be alone, as we are fated to be more than ever during this unprecedented time. And the preliminary research describing

the effects of all this suggests that loneliness increased 20-30% and emotional distress tripled during just the first month of quarantine. And now it's half a year later, with no clear end in sight.

We are living events that will be retold in the history books – and trying desperately not to die from them. The question we must answer – what does it mean to be a part of a congregation that cannot congregate – is just this year's language for the eternal question we always ask on Rosh Hashanah: *Mi yich'yeh umi yamut...* who shall live, and who shall die? Who by plague? Who by pandemic? Who by loneliness? Who will be taken before their time? Who will be tranquil and who tormented?

I worry for those among the 28% of Americans – including many of you – who live alone and have already been deprived of human contact either mostly or entirely for six months. I worry for those who may be living with loved ones but still suffering mightily from the disconnection to friends and family elsewhere. I worry for seniors who cannot see their children and grandchildren except on a screen. I worry for those who I know are buckling from the weight of their loneliness... and I worry for those who feel they're doing just fine. You see, the longer this goes on, the more it will change us forever, in some ways that will not strengthen us.

This is another of those times that will change so much about our lives, so many of our habits and ways of being. Who will we be – how will we be – when all of this is over? Will our adaptation to virtual relationship, with all of its convenience and all of its facileness, leave us unready to embrace the harder, more time-consuming, heart-consuming work of real relationship? After all, we were already addicted to our screens before this scourge, already redefining friendship as lightly as Facebook does, already prioritizing quantity of contact over quality and suffering the consequences. We will be different forever when this chapter in human history ends. What will that look and feel like?

The new year 5781 arrives with so many questions we cannot answer. This, too, is always a part of being human, but we can feel our answerlessness more acutely now, with the world spinning in utter turmoil.

This is my eighteenth High Holydays as your rabbi, and over the course of those many years, as I've been privileged to be invited into the defining moments of your lives, be they joyful or painful, I have learned a great truth from you. I have learned that we humans usually don't come unglued, even when confronted with the most awful of situations. When faced with horrible news, even our own mortality, we somehow find a way. I have watched again and again with astonishment as you've risen to the greatest challenges of your lives, and I've been inspired by your courage, your resilience, your readiness to adjust, to live with realities that you would have imagined to be far beyond your capacity before they imposed themselves upon you. More than you might think, the awful doesn't unglue us. Uncertainty, however – that can really take us apart, even more than awfulness. Just the waiting, consumed by fear about what we can feel might be coming, without knowing for sure what it will be, or how deep it will cut – that is terrifying, sometimes too much to bear.

Tonight, we are awash in the waiting as the new year 5781 dawns – waiting to see what our collective future holds during and after this pandemic. The only way to combat the agony

of that uncertainty is to begin now shaping the future we yearn to see. The great 20th century Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, taught that life is a succession of leaps into pathlessness. Sometimes, we enjoy the illusion of certainty about our future, until life disabuses us of the illusion. But has there ever been a moment less certain than this one, which bears no resemblance to anything we've ever seen or experienced before?

Instead of churning with fear over what we cannot know, let us leap into the pathlessness and build the future we want to know – the one that has brought you to this congregation that cannot congregate.

It is a future where you will not be alone – and where you will commit to ensuring that others will not be alone. My friend, Orthodox Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, said it perfectly when he wrote: “Every hand that we don't shake must be a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another, must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise.” In a world that seems to be nothing but isolation, we must be source points of connection. We must be asking ourselves, “Who in my family, or among my friends, or within this congregation needs me to prioritize quality over quantity – to be determined in going deeper than the superficial, in transcending acquaintanceship in favor of the real thing?” We have to, not only to survive this pandemic and help others to survive it – but because with every passing day, our habits are changing. We are changing. We are learning to leave precious pieces of our humanity behind, possibly for good. What felt impossible to us in March already feels frighteningly familiar, routine even, in September. We've grown used to being separated. We've even started talking about the ways it's better. What will be left of the obligation we feel only in another's eye once we are done living through this event for the history books? What will those history books say about who we became?

Sound too grandiose for such small, unhistoric acts of companionship? The greatest Jewish thinker of the 20th century, Abraham Joshua Heschel, didn't think so. Shortly before his death, he was interviewed on NBC and asked what message he wanted to convey to young people. His answer works plenty well for all people. Said Heschel, “Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. And above all, (let them) remember... to build a life as if it were a work of art.”

The absurdities, frustrations and disappointments of this, our moment for history, are too many to number. But there is meaning beyond them all. Because every deed counts. Every word has power. And our lives are to be built like a work of art. Let us create – together.